



RAUNCHY ENCOUNTERS

ESSAY BY **BRANDI ROMANO & MIRIAM STEIN BATTLES**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **BRANDI ROMANO & LYLE KRANNICHFELD**

Photograph by Lyle Krannichfeld.

It was January 2022, a beautiful sunny day with calm seas and mild wind. The weather was perfect, with sunny skies and a warm breeze off the ocean. Our private boat had spent the morning whale watching off the southern coast of Maui. We were just northwest of Molokini Crater when a large dark object appeared in the water. Our first thought was that it was a massive log or piece of debris. As we slowly approached, the mysterious object “exhaled.” A humpback whale! Within seconds, there was another exhalation. Wow there were two. Possibly a mother/calf pair? The captain put the engine in neutral as required by law, as we were within 100yds. We watched and waited to see what the pair would do.

As they moved closer and surfaced for air, it became clear that they were both adults and one of the whales was strangely discolored (brownish/gray) and disfigured. We were all perplexed at what we might be seeing. Lucky for us, the whales decided to approach our boat. By law, we weren’t allowed to approach the whales but if they approached us, we were not required to leave.



A humpback whale authority, an underwater photographer with a specialty in Humpback whales and whale research, said these photos were “tremendous” and that he had never seen anything

AS CLEAR AS THESE PHOTOS, DEMONSTRATING MALE-MALE SEX IN HUMPBACK WHALES.

Excitement ensued and I grabbed my camera. Because of laws put into place to protect the whales, I wasn't allowed to slide into the water as I wished. But I got creative. I leaned over the swim step at the back of the boat. Wearing a snorkel, I contorted myself so that I could stick my head underwater. I submerged my camera and kept my finger on the trigger as the whales seemed to perform ballet underwater, locked together in what appeared to be a mating dance. On the other side of the boat, my friend Lyle did the same thing.

They were elegant as they swam through the water, locked together, twirling in the water and changing positions. The dominant whale, clearly a male based on a highly visible penis, was surprisingly tender, wrapping his flippers around what appeared to be its mate. Although humpbacks are one of the most studied of all whales, very little is known about actual humpback mating habits. I thought, “Am I the first person to witness this behavior?” I was dizzy with excitement and felt lucky to be seeing this magical encounter.

I was in awe of not just their size, but of the seemingly bad condition of the one whale. Even from above the surface, I could tell there was something seriously wrong. Their two massive bodies were within 6-8 yards of the boat. Once they had passed by, others on the boat who were keeping watch, informed me that the whales had turned around and were heading back to the boat. I prepared for round two with these two mysterious whales. Again, they passed directly by and elegantly circled once again. I was in utter disbelief and saddened. The injured whale was covered in lice and was devastatingly emaciated. With several more laps through the dirty lice-filled water, the whales moved on. I was exhilarated.

And then the moment of truth...I got up and looked at the LCD to verify what I had captured and my jaw dropped! I was stunned to see the two whales engaging in sexual behavior. It appeared they were mating, something never before seen or captured photographically in humpback whales, a major frustration to cetacean researchers. I wondered if I had just taken what could be scientifically important photos.

As I reviewed the photos, it was clear that one whale was critically ill and had a broken, festering jaw wound. Likely a ship strike. Tragic. It was so skinny that it probably hadn't been able to eat since it became injured and seemed to be slowly dying. Humpback whales have made a wonderful comeback from the days of whaling but they still face danger at the hands of humans. According to research carried out by the non-profit, Friend of the Sea, ship strikes kill more than 20,000 whales (of all species) every year. Humpbacks in both the Atlantic and Pacific populations cross dangerous shipping routes during their migrations.

Thoughts were racing through my mind at what was captured...an emotional encounter to say the least. My heart broke for the injured, starving whale's suffering. The other whale was perfectly healthy and seemed intent on sex. The injured whale couldn't seem to ward off the healthy whale's advances and he seemed oblivious to its condition and kept attempting to have sex with it. I believe the dying whale was trying to use the boat in an attempt to hide from its “attacker.” I will never know what happened to that whale but feel blessed to have experienced such a rare behavioral sighting.



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But wait! There's a twist! Interestingly, upon investigation with scientists over the coming weeks, it was determined by fluke patterns, that the injured whale was a male individual commonly seen in Alaska. It must have been ship struck during the migration to Hawaii. So now we know that it wasn't an actual mating because there was no female present but this raises all kinds of other questions.

Did the aggressive male know he was trying to "mate" with another male? Was he just too driven by instincts and hormones to be oblivious to the sick whale's condition and sex or was it another example of homosexual behavior in the animal kingdom? He pursued the sick whale and there was clearly sexual penetration...just like other species, male-male sex is possible in whales. Homosexual behavior has been witnessed in not just cetaceans, but primates too. But as in all mammals, all mating is sex but not all sex is mating.

To keep things interesting, sexual behavior towards a dying pod member has also been previously witnessed in humpbacks, narwhals and orcas. In 1986 narwhals approached a dying female with penises extended but nobody knows why. In 1996,

humpback males were seen approaching a dying whale with penises extended. I wondered if in this case, the aggressor knew it was having sex with a male or did it not care because this is something whales do as a form of protection to their dying kin? But if it was a protective position, why the sex?

As it turns out, male-male relationships are a big question in humpback whale research. An exciting video was taken in 2004 of what seemed to be a similar whale "sexy dance," but the video actually featured two males. Years later, photos got scientists excited because multiple whales with penises extended were visible, but it turned out that no female was present.

Researchers have never seen anything as clear as these photos that demonstrates male-male sex in humpback whales happens. But it raises so many more questions. These wonderful photographic moments in time are great but it will take years of research to find out how they fit into the bigger picture.

Perhaps someday scientists will know what the behavior in our photos indicates or means but I will cherish this encounter forever. **OG**